

Dig Deep into God's Word

The power of inductive Bible study for your group

By Justin Marr

"The Septuagint is paramount in understanding the Hellenized Jewish Diaspora," proclaimed the white-haired lecturer from behind a podium. I looked to my left and right and saw a sleepy glaze cover the members of my small group. I could almost see the unintelligible vocabulary of academia flying over their heads.

Our church had invited a biblical studies professor to come and give a lecture to our congregation. My small group was eager to attend and dig deeper into Scripture. We were hungry for something beyond surface level Bible reading, but unfortunately, we left with a lingering feeling of discouragement.

We are all intelligent people. We are educated and we take studying the Bible seriously. But many of the words coming out of the visiting professor's mouth were shrouded in mystery. He spoke of original Greek and Hebrew words like they were common knowledge. It made us feel like we were incapable of breaching the wall to deeper study. My small group had come and knocked, but despite this professor's best efforts, the door was not opening.

Biblical studies can be overwhelming. Words like exegesis and hermeneutics are tossed into the fray and it can feel like you need a seminary degree just to stay afloat. But luckily, you don't need a Ph.D. in biblical studies to glean meaning and application from Scripture. All you need is a Bible and the willingness to ask the right questions. The trick is to think inductively. If you pay attention to the details—the who, what, when, where, and most importantly, the why—then you have all you need to let the Holy Spirit bring the text to life.

Inductive Bible Study with Your Small Group

One of the best tools for studying Scripture is inductive Bible study. It is the process of interpreting and applying Scripture by focusing only on the details found directly in the text. This is an invaluable exercise for small groups. Since we all approach Scripture from a unique point of view, collaboration allows for more to be seen and shared.

It might be easier to look up a set of verses in a commentary, but discovering the details without these aids allows you to see God's Word through the lens of your own individual perspective.

Step 1: Determine Genre

The Bible is a complicated book. What other book was written by upwards of 40 God-inspired people over the span of more than 1,000 years? It is a true masterpiece. The variety in authorship and time, however, did not lend itself to consistency in genre. It is important to discover the literary genre when interpreting Scripture because it affects our understanding of the author's purposes. The intent of the book of Acts (a historical recounting of events) is very different from the intent of 1 Corinthians (a letter to a specific group of people). It's important for your small group to know what they're dealing with. Several genres are represented in the Bible:

- Law (e.g., Leviticus)
- History (e.g., 1 and 2 Kings)
- Wisdom (e.g., Proverbs)
- Poetry (e.g., Song of Solomon)
- Prophetic (e.g., Isaiah)
- Apocalyptic (e.g., Revelation)
- Gospel Narrative (e.g., Luke)
- Epistle/Letter (e.g., Ephesians)

Philemon, the book I will use as an example, is an epistle or letter. We know that letters are written to specific people for a particular purpose. Now we just need to know that purpose.

Step 2: Get Familiar

In order to really understand a book or section of Scripture, your small group needs to get comfortable with it. The best way to do that is to read it multiple times. Have you ever noticed new aspects of a movie when you watch it the second, third, or fourth time? The same is true for reading scripture.

It's best if you can read the text you're studying 10 or more times. Ideally, each member of your small group can complete this task before you meet for the discussion. However, one or two read-throughs might be helpful. Keep these things in mind while reading:

- What stands out?
- Do you notice any reoccurring words or themes?
- Focus on a different character or aspect with every read.

For Philemon this isn't too difficult—it's only one page.

Step 3: Note the Nuances

English versions of Scripture were translated from the original languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic). If you ever took another language in high school, you'll know that there isn't always an easy English equivalent to every foreign word. Because of this, there can be slight word variation between the many English versions of the Bible.

Some translations seek to use words that are as equivalent as possible to the original (like the ESV, NASB, or LEB) and others seek to use words that carry the essence of the original intent (like the NIV or NLT). By reading a book or section of Scripture in various translations (many of which you can find at BibleGateway.com), you can pick up on the small differences and nuances between them. This will give your small group a more complete understanding of what the original language depicted. It will allow them to see some of the translational differences without having to know ancient Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic.

- Are there any major differences between translations?
- Do any of the variations drastically change the meaning?
- Does one version clear up something that was confusing in another?

Example:

In verse 19 of Philemon, the difference between the New Living Translation (NLT) and the Lexham English Bible (LEB) is worth noting. The LEB states: "Lest I mention to you that you owe me even your very self besides." The NLT, on the other hand, states: "And I won't mention that you owe me your very soul!" The difference of "self" and "soul" can be profound.

This distinction helps us recognize a difference between a possibly literal translation of the Greek word and a more interpretive explanation of what that word may have been suggesting. "Soul" evokes the idea that Paul may have been the one that helped Philemon come to faith in Christ. "Self" could mean the same thing, but "soul" evokes it in a more obvious way. Differences like this are crucial in helping us see the bigger picture.

Step 4: Establish the Characters

1. Identify the author. Establishing authorship is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The more your small group knows about the writer, the more they can understand the author's intent.

- The author is typically established in the first few verses of a book.
 - Search the outlying verses if you're studying a section of Scripture in the middle of a book.
- Discover how the author is communicating.
 - Are they writing a letter? Are they recounting events?
 - How does this affect what you know about them?

- Search for anything distinctive about the author:
 - Do they mention where they are?
 - Do they talk about their past?
 - Can you gather anything about their personality?

Example:

In Philemon, the writer identifies himself as Paul (Philemon 1). Timothy is also mentioned as a secondary author. We're able to determine that Paul is writing from prison (vv. 1, 9). Because he calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" instead of a prisoner of Rome or some other city-state, we can deduce that he is in prison for his work in spreading the Gospel.

Paul shows hints of great humility. He has some kind of authority, but chooses not to use it and instead identifies himself simply as an old man (vv. 8–9).

We can also gather that Paul plans to be out of prison by requesting the preparation of a guest room (v. 22).

2. Identify the audience. After your small group establishes authorship, the next step is audience. You want to know as much as possible about who the text is for. This will help you understand the author's purpose in writing. Furthermore, applying the text to everyday life is much easier when you know enough about the audience to put yourself in their shoes.

- Search the text for any indication of who the audience is.
 - Is it established near the beginning?
 - Does the author refer to a single person or a group of people?
- If the audience isn't specifically mentioned, what can you learn about the audience based on context?
 - Is it a historical recounting?
 - Is it a story to illustrate a point?
 - What does this tell you about the audience?
- Search for anything distinctive about the audience:
 - Does it say where they are?
 - Is their past mentioned?
 - Can you gather anything about their personality?

Example:

Like most letters in the Bible, the audience for Philemon is also the name of the book. Philemon (a person) is the chief recipient of this letter, but it is also addressed to Apphia, Archippus, and to "the church that meets in your home."

We can learn quite a bit about Philemon from the text. Because the church met in his home, it is logical to assume he was fairly hospitable. The fondness of Paul's words in verses 4–7 show us that Paul and Philemon had an especially good relationship.

In verse 1, Paul calls Philemon a "fellow worker." This sentiment is echoed in verse 17 with "partner" and, therefore, Philemon was probably invested in the same work as Paul—the spreading of the gospel.

Lastly, we know that Philemon owes Paul his "very self" (v. 19). Because Paul's life and Philemon's life are both rooted in Christ, it is possible that this could mean Paul is the reason Philemon came to faith in Christ.

3. Identify other important characters. The Bible tells stories through people. This often goes further than just the author and audience. To get a clear picture of what's going on, your small group needs to identify any other important characters in the text.

- Identify all the characters in the book or section of Scripture.
 - How many are there? How many times are they mentioned?
 - How important are they? Are they a chief part of the narrative?
 - Who seems to stand out above other characters?
- Determine how they're related to the author and audience.
- Search for anything distinctive about the other characters:
 - Does it say where they are?
 - Is their past mentioned?
 - Can you gather anything about their personality?

Example:

In the case of Philemon, the letter focuses heavily on a slave named Onesimus (v. 16). In verse 11, Paul notes that Onesimus used to be useless to Philemon, and in verse 15 we learn that Onesimus was separated from Philemon. These observations, coupled with the fact that he is being sent back, tell us that Onesimus is probably Philemon's runaway slave.

Paul writes that Onesimus became his son (v. 10). It doesn't make sense that Paul became his literal father. This intimate language more likely means Onesimus began following Christ because of Paul's teaching. More evidence for this is in verse 16, where Paul says he is a brother in the Lord instead of a slave.

It is important to note that Onesimus probably delivered this letter. Onesimus was the only person we know of who was sent back from where Paul was living (v. 12).

Step 5: Establish the Situation

Now that you've established the characters, you can finally get to the why questions. This is the meat of the study. Every sentence, story, and statement is there for a reason. Our ability to interpret the text and gather application hinges on this step. Discuss the possibilities with your small group.

- Seek out the underlying thesis for the passage. What's the main point or focus?
 - Is it meant to teach a concept?
 - Is there a call to action?
 - Is it meant to encourage or inspire?
- Ask the why question as much as you can:
 - Why did the author include this sentence, word, theme, etc.?
 - Why is it structured the way it is?
 - Why was this written?
- Use this information to help you interpret the text.
 - Test your theory against each verse. Does it hold up?

Example:

The first point of focus is verse 9, where Paul makes a strong appeal for Onesimus' sake. We learn that Onesimus has been a great help to Paul while in prison (vv. 11, 13). Paul even mentions that he "would have liked to keep him" there to help. But instead, Paul sees fit to return Onesimus to Philemon. But why?

It is possible that Paul subtly hints for Philemon to legally free Onesimus and send him back (vv. 14, 20–21). This could be the reason for the appeal.

The more important issue, however, seems to be reconciliation between two people that have a profound change in relationship. Paul does not send Onesimus back as a slave, but "better than a slave, as a dear brother" and even "as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord" (v. 16). Paul tells Philemon to "welcome him as you would welcome me."

Furthermore, Paul goes to great lengths to see this reconciliation through. Not only does he deprive himself of Onesimus's help, but he also says if Onesimus "has done you any wrong or owes you anything, [then] charge it to me" (v. 18). Reconciliation is so important that Paul is willing to see it happen at any cost.

All of this evidence leads me to a possible interpretation. Perhaps Paul's purpose is to teach Philemon and the other members of his Church about the transformative power of Christ. The point is to say that Christ transforms relationships—even if that relationship was previously governed by slavery and debt. To illustrate the power of the Gospel, Paul urges Philemon to view his runaway slave as a dear brother in Christ.

Step 6: Apply the Text

The last step is application. Now that your small group has discussed and interpreted the details, it will be an easy transition to talk about how it might apply to their lives. Prepare a few questions ahead of time to help guide your small group in the application process.

- Choose open ended questions. Avoid anything that could be answered with "yes" or "no."
- Make it personal. Ask people to share an experience to relate to the text.
- Ask questions that challenge them to take action.

Example:

- How do you think Philemon felt about Paul's appeal? How would you feel?
- Imagine what it must have been like for Onesimus to carry this letter back and deliver it to Philemon. What do you think was going through his head?
- In what way can you exhibit the same kind of humility that Paul showed when he made his appeal to Philemon?
- Have you ever been wronged by a fellow Christ follower? How would you handle this?
- Do any relationships in your life need reconciliation? What steps can you take this week toward seeing this happen?

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Discuss

1. How much experience do you have with inductive Bible study? Have you used this method with your group? Why or why not?
2. When preparing for a study, do you skip over any of these steps? How will you ensure that you will cover all of them?
3. Group members need a solid understanding of a passage in order to apply it faithfully to their lives. How much time do you spend on helping group members understand the passage you're studying?